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The right to believe, to worship and witness
The right to change one's belief or religion
The right to join together and express one's belief

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UZBEKISTAN: No religious freedom deterioration after bombings

By Igor Rotar, Forum 18

Protestants, Jehovah's Witnesses, Hare Krishna devotees, Muslims and independent human rights groups Forum 18 News Service has spoken to all agree that, in marked contrast to the situation after the March/April terrorist attacks, the authorities reactions after the most recent terrorist bombings have not caused a substantial deterioration in the religious freedom situation.

Reactions by the authorities to the terrorist attacks in Tashkent on 30 July have not yet caused affected religious believers substantially, Forum 18 News Service has established. This opinion is shared by Allison Gill, head of the Tashkent office of Human Rights Watch, Talib Yakubov, head of the Human Rights Organisation in Uzbekistan, and representatives of religious minorities (Protestants, Jehovah's Witnesses and Hare Krishnas) who spoke to Forum 18 on 3 August. The terrorist attacks were made against the US and Israeli embassies, and the General Prosecutor's Office in the Uzbek capital.

One Tashkent Protestant who preferred not to be named told Forum 18 that literally hours after the terrorist attacks a Protestant, Maksed Jabargenov, was called in for questioning by the National Security Service for Karakalpakstan [Qoraqalpoghiston] (an autonomous region in the north-west of Uzbekistan). Jabargenov had previously been fined for participating in an unregistered religious meeting. However, he was released virtually within the hour. "At least for the time being, that is the only case of persecution of our fellow-believers known to us following the recent terrorist attacks," Forum 18's source stated (see F18News 9 July 2004 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=359).

Sergei Artyushkov, head of a group of Jehovah's Witnesses applying for registration in Tashkent, told Forum 18 on 3 August that "in general, we have not noticed a significant stepping up of state policy against us following the terrorist attacks. True, on 1 August the police burst into a private home in the town of Kagan (on the outskirts of Bukhara [Bukhoro] in western Uzbekistan), where a group of our fellow-believers had gathered. They were taken to the police station and held there until morning. However, such cases occurred in Kagan before this as well, and we cannot say that this infringement of believers' rights was provoked by the terrorist attacks on 30 July."

Speaking to Forum 18 on 3 August, Jehovah's Witness Erkin Khabibov said that straight after the terrorist attacks he received a telephone call from the department to combat terrorism at the internal affairs administration for Bukhara region and was ordered to come to see them the following day. However, when Khabibov said that he would not come to the department unless he received an official summons, the police did not insist on their demand.

The authorities' current behaviour is in marked contrast with their behaviour after the terrorist attacks at the end of March and beginning of April. Then, all representatives of religious minorities, who had been found guilty under administrative law of taking part in unregistered groups, were called in for "preventative" interviews with the police, and many of them also had their fingerprints taken (see F18News 13 April http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=298 and 4 June 2004

http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=334).

Neither has any general repressive action so far been recorded against Muslims. Following the March/April terrorist attacks, Muslims were the major group to suffer, and many former prisoners who had been freed under an amnesty were again placed behind bars after weapons or drugs were planted on them.

Immediately after the attacks, police summoned for questioning Akhmajon Madmarov, deputy head of the Fergana regional branch of the Independent

Organisation for Human Rights in Uzbekistan in Margelan (a town in the Fergana [Farghona] valley in eastern Uzbekistan), he told Forum 18 from Margelan on 3 August. Three of his sons are currently in prison for membership of the radical Islamic Hizb-ut-Tahrir party. "So far as I know, other relatives of prisoners of conscience were also called in for police questioning, as well as Muslims who had previously been imprisoned for their religious beliefs," Madmarov told Forum 18. (A description of Hizb-ut-Tahir's aims is in F18News 29 October 2003 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=170).

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Human rights activist Tulkin Karayev told Forum 18 from the southern town of Karshi [Qarshi] on 3 August that following the 30 July terrorist attacks the authorities in Karshi region had tried to stop devout women from wearing hijabs. However, Karayev says that so far there have been no other recorded cases of discrimination against believers provoked by the terrorist attacks.

For more background information see Forum 18's Uzbekistan religious freedom

survey at http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=105

A printer-friendly map of Uzbekistan is available at

http://www.nationalgeographic.com/xpeditions/atlas/index.html?Parent=asia&Rootmap=uzbeki

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